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Description of document: Department of Agriculture (USDA) Strategic Communications Plan for the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) 2014

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Department of Agriculture  
Departmental FOIA Officer  
1400 Independence Avenue, SW  
Room 4039-A  
Washington, DC 20250-0706  
[USDA Public Access Link \(PAL\)](#)  
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United States  
Department of  
Agriculture

Office of the General Counsel  
1400 Independence Ave. SW  
Washington, DC 20250-1400

February 5, 2021

**Delivered via Electronic Mail**

**Re: Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) Request No. 2021-DA-02114-F  
Final Response**

This is the final response to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request you submitted to the U. S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Office of Information Affairs' (OIA), FOIA Division. Your request, which was received on January 29, 2021, sought the following records:

I request a copy of the Strategic Communication Plan of the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS). This plan was developed with the help of Osborn & Barr Communications Inc. in approximately 2014.

Your request has been processed under the FOIA, 5 U.S.C. § 552.

A search for responsive records was conducted by the USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS). The search located the document you requested. The document is enclosed.

You may appeal this response by email at [USDAFOIA@usda.gov](mailto:USDAFOIA@usda.gov). Your appeal must be in writing, and it must be received electronically no later than 90 calendar days from the date of this letter. The OGC will not consider appeals received after the 90 calendar-day limit. Appeals received after 5:00 p.m. EST will be considered received the next business day. The appeal letter should include the FOIA tracking number, a copy of the original request, the OIA's response to your original request, and a statement explaining the basis of your appeal. For quickest possible handling, the subject line of your email and the appeal letter should be marked "Freedom of Information Act Appeal" and reference FOIA No. 2021-DA-02114-F.

You may seek dispute resolution services from the OIA's FOIA Public Liaison, Ms. Camille Aponte. Ms. Aponte may be contacted by telephone at (202) 505-0271, or electronically at [Camille.Aponte@usda.gov](mailto:Camille.Aponte@usda.gov) or [USDAFOIA@usda.gov](mailto:USDAFOIA@usda.gov).

You also have the option to seek assistance from the Office of Government Information Services (OGIS). Please visit <https://www.archives.gov/ogis/mediation-program/request-assistance> for information about how to request OGIS assistance in relation to a FOIA request.

Provisions of the FOIA allow us to recover part of the cost of processing your request. In this instance, no fees will be charged.

If you have any questions regarding the processing of this request, please contact Ms. Susan Ruppel at (202) 694-5982 or electronically at [susan.ruppe@usda.gov](mailto:susan.ruppe@usda.gov) or [USDAFOIA@usda.gov](mailto:USDAFOIA@usda.gov).

For additional information regarding USDA FOIA regulations and processes, please refer to the information available online at [www.dm.usda.gov/foia](http://www.dm.usda.gov/foia).

The OIA's FOIA Division appreciates the opportunity to assist you with this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Alexis R. Graves".

Alexis R. Graves  
Departmental FOIA Officer  
Office of Information Affairs

Enclosure: Responsive Records (9 pages)

# NASS Communications Plan: 2014-2017

## 1 BACKGROUND

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In July 2011, USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) took its first step towards long-range strategic communications with the implementation of an agency communications plan. Developed under the guidance of the Communications Advisory Council, the plan aimed to improve data providers' and user' perceived value of NASS products and services. Many of its tactics were internally focused to build the cultural infrastructure and tools needed to accomplish the aim.

In the past three years, NASS made much progress and many communications achievements: cultivating a consistent identity; bridging the internal information gap; preparing for regional public affairs specialists; increasing our social media presence; and implementing a successful 2012 Census of Agriculture communications campaign. But our work is far from over. Our customers' and employees' perceived value of NASS products is still not where it should be.

The next agency communications plan will help move NASS to the next level in the next four years. It will continue to build on what we have accomplished while expanding focus on external audiences to try and raise the perceived value that we need as an agency to remain relevant as the leading source of agriculture statistics.

*At NASS we talk about creating a level playing field for producers with our data. In terms of communications, products, and tools – we are not on a level playing field in the market place. As an agency we need to excel and stay ahead of other data providers. An improved and usability-tested website, a website and products optimized for mobile devices, more social media and two-way communication, and other future-thinking tactics will help take us there.*

## 2 SITUATION ANALYSIS

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To assess our current situation, we surveyed NASS employees and customers to gauge their current perception of NASS. What we learned from them was both encouraging and, in some instances, alarming.

On the positive side, data users that responded to the survey: 1) consider NASS to be their primary source of data; 2) use our data frequently; and 3) use our data to make decisions for their organizations. On the negative side, we heard dissatisfaction among both audiences with our website.

From our analysis, much of our agency's energy is focused on the first two elements of our mission but we forget about the useful aspect. Data collection and release is how we measure much of our success, and it's even how we identify ourselves in our tagline "Agriculture Counts." But is it our entire job and does it resonate with our audience?

November 20, 2014

Our current positioning conveys what NASS does, but not why it matters. But our audiences want to know why we do what we do. It provides deeper understanding and context, things that our customers say they would like to see more of from our agency.

NASS exists to help make better decisions for agriculture and rural America. That’s why we collect data. This is a compelling “why.” This is the “why” that strengthens our brand and the agency identity. It all comes full circle.

With this comprehensive communications plan, we can modernize the way NASS is perceived, both internally and externally advancing agency cultural transformation, to better convey the immense value NASS data provide. Our improved agency communications will help pave the way for NASS to fulfill its mission of providing useful statistics.

### 3 PLAN GOAL

**INCREASE THE PERCEIVED VALUE OF NASS AND ITS PRODUCTS AMONG OUR EMPLOYEES AND CUSTOMERS BY 2016.**

### 4 STRATEGIES

What	Why
Strengthen NASS identity	Our identity is our strongest asset. How we are known and perceived sets the tone for everything we do.
Strengthen customer relations	The more we know about our customers, the better we’ll be able to engage them. We still have much to learn about our customers and their expectations of us. This begins with a steadfast focus on our customers and the relationship we have with them; making it more two-way and less one-way.
Improve the data collection experience	We are not always on the cutting edge of data collection technology and must continue to modernize our data collection efforts to keep pace with the market and respondent expectations. We must work cohesively as an agency to ensure those charged with interacting with data providers are fully equipped with the tools and information to encourage response – how to respond; why this information is important; how it will be applied to benefit the respondent.
Improve data product accessibility and presentation	Our customers expect 1) easy access to NASS data; and 2) greater context and relevance to them.

## 5 STRATEGY NO. 1: STRENGTHEN THE NASS IDENTITY

### 5.1 NASS LONG RANGE PLANNING TEAM RECOMMENDATIONS

The tactics presented as part of this strategy support the following recommendations from the NASS Long Range Planning Team (Final Report, May 2011)

Recommendation	Brief Description
#7 – <i>USDA Data Leader</i> : Provide leadership for the USDA in data collection and publication of statistical information.	Proactively and consistently identify NASS as the statistical arm and data leader for USDA, both internally and externally.
#13 – <i>Expand NASS Job Series</i> : Identify and expand NASS job series to meet the expanding roles of the agency.	Assess the skills needed within our agency and what job series best fit those skills and re-evaluate field office staffing decisions based on the agency goals.

### 5.2 KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS AND TACTICS

Key Performance Indicators	Tactical Activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Increase in employee job satisfaction*</li> <li>▪ Increase media mentions (both traditional and social media)*</li> <li>▪ Stronger recall of NASS mission among stakeholders (Benchmark can be captured during an upcoming survey with the Federal Consulting Group through the University of Michigan)*</li> <li>▪ NASS Identity Dashboard</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Establish NASS identity dashboard</li> <li>▪ Develop key messages to support the NASS identity that help clarify the agency's identity for all audiences</li> <li>▪ Create standard materials and collateral tools to help communicate the agency's key messages – ideas include, talking points, "About NASS" PPT presentation, brochure, etc.</li> <li>▪ Establish a position description for a regional public affairs specialist that would help maintain a unified coordinated NASS identity with skilled regional support</li> <li>▪ Conduct training in a tiered approach as needed to engage employees (i.e. senior managers; field staff; HQ staff; PAO staff; etc.) to ingrain our purpose and value in every employee and in everything we do ("living the brand").</li> <li>▪ Create website and web content governance policy and identity guidelines. Establish a council or working group to review and oversee the content and identity of the NASS website and all virtual products and tools.</li> <li>▪ Evaluate and reconsider types and purpose of templates for field and regional offices</li> <li>▪ Distribute an E-newsletter to data subscribers providing quick snippets of recently released reports, data, and upcoming surveys, reports, etc. [Per timeline this is a YELLOW tactic.]</li> <li>▪ Execute a proactive media outreach plan</li> <li>▪ Develop and implement an editorial calendar</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Execute the Communications Advisory Council Consistent Identity Task Force plan to rollout and fully implement PSM-5</li> <li>Develop a communications plan for the 2017 Census of Agriculture to cohesively integrate the Census program and NASS agency messaging. As appropriate, the plan will address list building, data collection, and data release and will help strengthen the connection between NASS and the Census for respondents and data users. (See 11 – Appendix for additional information)</li> </ul>
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\*Denotes benchmark is needed

## 6 STRATEGY NO. 2: STRENGTHEN CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIPS

### 6.1 NASS LONG RANGE PLANNING TEAM RECOMMENDATIONS

The tactics presented as part of this strategy support the following recommendations from the NASS Long Range Planning Team (Final Report, May 2011)

Recommendation	Brief Description
<b>#2 – Customer-Centric Organization:</b> Establish a customer-centric approach to continually improving our data products and delivery.	Create an ongoing program to identify and understand our various audiences with specific needs and capabilities, including non-traditional customers and those involved in emerging issues.
<b>#3 – Strengthen Partnerships:</b> Expand interaction and strengthen partnerships with other government agencies, external stakeholders, Congress, industry groups, and other organizations.	Increase work with USDA partners, stakeholders, industry, and others to increase collaborative opportunities and help ensure a renewed, dedicated focus on partnerships.

### 6.2 KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS AND TACTICS

Key Performance Indicators	Tactical Activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increase in speaker invitations at industry events, such as trade shows, meetings, conferences, etc.*</li> <li>Increase positive mentions of NASS</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Survey customers to define segments, expectations, and their relations relative to NASS</li> <li>Engage the Advisory Committee on Agriculture Statistics on key issues pertaining to the agency’s communications activities and how it reaches its customers. Possibly establish a communications subgroup to have a frequent sounding board and dialogue as NASS implements this communications plan.</li> <li>Create an annual customer outreach awards program and add</li> </ul>



<p>data*</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Increase in number of organizations willing to support NASS surveys and encourage participation*</li> </ul>	<p>as an element for spot awards for employees.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Evaluate the NASS trade show and events calendar on a routine basis to ensure participation at events best reflects the agency's current communications needs. Proactively seek out opportunities for NASS to participate in event panels and sessions to present information on NASS programs and products.</li> <li>▪ Provide regular senior management outreach with stakeholders and media to solidify their presence as NASS spokespeople and leaders in the industry.</li> <li>▪ Develop a communications platform for customer representatives to have open lines of communications with NASS in order to present their priorities and needs (i.e. additional data user meetings; one-on-one meetings, online forums, etc.) [Per timeline this is a YELLOW tactic.]</li> <li>▪ Create more forums to help key constituencies kept abreast of NASS surveys and products and provide more opportunities for two-way communications, ideas include hosting webinars, Google+ Hangouts, Twitter chats, etc.</li> </ul>
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\*Denotes benchmark is needed

## 7 STRATEGY NO. 3: IMPROVE DATA COLLECTION EXPERIENCE

### 7.1 NASS LONG RANGE PLANNING TEAM RECOMMENDATIONS

The tactics presented as part of this strategy support the following recommendations from the NASS Long Range Planning Team (Final Report, May 2011)

Recommendation	Brief Description
#1 – <i>Respondent-Centric Organization</i> : Become a more “respondent-centric” organization by implementing strategies to improve the data collection experience for respondents.	Improve the quality, support development, and promote the use of electronic data collection. Additionally focus communications on the benefits of data and the central role of respondents in data collection.
#4 – <i>Effectively Leverage Research</i> : Establish a more effective, transparent link between Agency research and operational programs.	Increase communication and collaboration with RDD to submit research requests to address concerns that previously have been overlooked. Through the contributions of research, improve the overall quality of our products and programs.



## 7.2 KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS AND TACTICS

Key Performance Indicators	Tactical Activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Increase in percentage of survey responses online*</li> <li>▪ Decrease in customer service call and email logs for assistance filling out surveys*</li> <li>▪ Increase in positive-tone stories about NASS*</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Use various research methods including cognitive interviews, split-sample tests, usability experience tests (including eye tracking), etc. to improve and establish communications best practices and standards for NASS products and tools.</li> <li>▪ Focus more activities on electronic response and communication, including: communicating with survey respondents via email; collecting emails as part of the survey to help move the agency towards an email “mail list” – especially for those most likely to respond via EDR.</li> <li>▪ Equip enumerators both in the field and on the phone with how to positively position surveys to encourage response – provide stories of “how” the data are used.</li> <li>▪ Generate a library of stories media involving key decisions that were made using NASS data and proactively pitch them to the</li> <li>▪ Publicize process improvements and results along the way to customers.</li> </ul>

\*Denotes benchmark is needed

## 8 STRATEGY NO. 4: IMPROVE DATA PRODUCT PRESENTATION AND ACCESSIBILITY

### 8.1 NASS LONG RANGE PLANNING TEAM RECOMMENDATIONS

The tactics presented as part of this strategy support the following recommendations from the NASS Long Range Planning Team (Final Report, May 2011)

Recommendation	Brief Description
#2 – <i>Customer-Centric Organization</i> : Establish a customer-centric approach to continually improving our data products and delivery.	Enhance data products and delivery based on customer needs and audiences. Educate our user community on the availability and breadth of the data NASS provides and <i>how</i> it relates to information, programs, funding provided by others.
#7 – <i>USDA Data Leader</i> : Provide leadership for the USDA in data collection and publication of statistical information.	Increase relevance to policy issues and support the continual development, wide distribution and easy access to more useful data.

## 8.2 KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS AND TACTICS

Key Performance Indicators	Tactical Activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Increase subscriber list*</li> <li>▪ Decrease negative and increase positive feedback on Quickstats*</li> <li>▪ Decrease in customer service call and email logs*</li> <li>▪ Increase in social media impact*</li> <li>▪ Improved Customer satisfaction rates*</li> <li>▪ Increase in the number of repeat visits to the NASS website*</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Institute new and/or expanded best practices and standards for data products, both print and web/virtual formats.</li> <li>▪ Revamp the NASS website look, organization, writing and 508 compliance to engage visitors and enhance the user experience to invite increased interest in NASS products</li> <li>▪ Provide more tools and resources to improve the usability and user experience of Quickstats. For communications, this could include hosting webinars on using Quickstats, providing more plain language instructional tips, etc. [Per timeline this is a YELLOW tactic.]</li> <li>▪ Initiate ongoing internal training on researching, accessing and providing context to NASS Data, making each employee a “data expert” at an appropriate level.</li> <li>▪ Provide downloadable templates to field and regional public affairs specialists for their use, such as reports, infographics, etc. [Per timeline this is a YELLOW tactic.]</li> <li>▪ Proactively find opportunities for SMEs to provide context for data</li> <li>▪ Optimize the NASS website for a full mobile experience</li> <li>▪ Execute a customer satisfaction survey to benchmark our customers’ experience and evaluate results</li> <li>▪ Integrate internal and external usability testing into all web products before, during and after launch.</li> </ul>

\*Denotes benchmark is needed

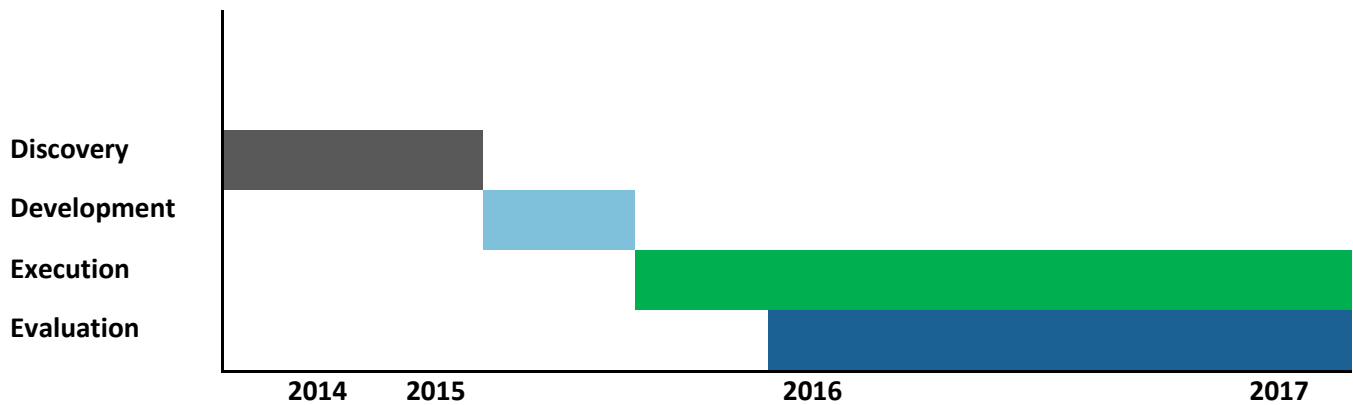
## 9 PLAN IMPLEMENTATION

This is as a four-year plan built around the following phases of implementation:

- Discovery – We still have much to learn about our target audiences and their expectations. This phase of the plan is intended to fill in the critical gaps between what we know, what we think and what we don’t know.
- Development – Armed with fresh intelligence from the discovery period, the development phase is defined largely by creating communications resources and other initiatives to help us connect with our targets. This is when we tackle message development, tools and training programs.
- Execution – This phase is when we begin to bring our new messages to our customers and the marketplace.
- Evaluation – This communication plan is organic and may change over time. As a result, this phase works in tandem with the execution period. Evaluation and measurement will inform

revisions to the plan along the way. The identity dashboard will be created to track progress against the key performance indicators.

## 9.1 IMPLEMENTATION TIMELINE



## 10 BENCHMARK AND EVALUATION

- Conduct a Foresee Survey on the NASS website during the Discovery Phase to establish benchmarks and strategic goals leading to the improved perceived value of NASS products among its customers. Repeat the Foresee Survey during the Evaluation Phase to measure the impact.
- Use the Internal Survey of NASS Data User Attitude Survey conducted in July 2014 as the benchmark for employee's perceived value of NASS products. Repeat the survey during the Evaluation Phase to measure the results.
- Use the new Federal Consulting Services survey to measure external customer satisfaction with NASS, our products and our services. Repeat each year.
- Use elements of the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey to measure internal employee satisfaction with the tools they have to do their jobs.
- Use the Identity Dashboard to track progress against key performance indicators.

## 11 APPENDIX – 2017 CENSUS OF AGRICULTURE COMMUNICATIONS

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In addition to the phases of implementation for enhancing our agency communications efforts, a separate plan will be created to promote the 2017 Census of Agriculture. The Census of Agriculture plan will be implemented simultaneously with the agency plan and will include tactics aimed list building, building awareness, encouraging response, thanking respondents and showcasing results and trends to data users during Census data release.

- **Partnership Development** - NASS formed and enhanced many valuable relationships with agricultural and community-based organizations during the 2007 and 2012 Census of Agriculture. Staff maintained these relationships through stakeholder communications and follow-up contacts. We will build on those relationships and foster new partnerships for the 2017 Census.
- **Field Office Outreach** - Our field offices are our direct line to farmers and ranchers who are called on to participate in the Census of Agriculture. We will provide them with tools and training to help them better encourage participation in the Census at a local level.
- **Communications and Media Outreach Plan** – As the Census planning team works to target key demographics for participation, we will develop paid and earned media strategies focused on those populations. This plan will include public relations, social media and other marketing elements, in addition to an editorial calendar specific to pitching Census-relevant stories and interviews. The content will also be available to the field offices for local placement.
- **Collateral Materials** - Promotional materials will be updated to reflect the new NASS creative branding. These will be tailored to fit all stages of the 2017 Census promotion, for national use and use by individual states or data provider groups.
- **CAC Communications** – Engagement sessions will be established throughout the 2017 Census of Agriculture planning and promotion to involve the CAC and leverage individual expertise and feedback.